



**CHPC Testimony on 2019 Charter Revision
March 21, 2019**

Hello Chair Benjamin and fellow commissioners:

Thank you for inviting me to testify here today. My name is Jessica Katz, I am the Executive Director of the Citizens Housing and Planning Council. Since our founding in 1937, CHPC has sought to advance practical public policies to support the housing stock in New York City by better understanding New York’s most pressing housing and neighborhood needs.

NYC’s land use and planning process, while imperfect, is far more robust, transparent, and predictable than the majority of its counterparts in other cities. While it is often reviled by developers, city agencies, and community activists alike, as the old saying goes, the mark of a good compromise is when all parties are equally unhappy. Our City’s land use process is by no means perfect, but it has stood the test of time. Any changes should be weighed carefully and CHPC commends the Commission for its diligent work on this herculean task.

CHPC believes our planning process should meet the following goals:

- Balance local and citywide perspectives
- Incorporate accurate data
- Address the needs of both current and future residents
- Be decision-driven

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- And provide better ways for neighbors and communities to participate and stay informed

Any improvements to our current system should make it easier for New Yorkers to say “Yes” to local land use actions that they support – not simply create new ways to say “No.” This means raising our standards for how we inform communities about planning, and finding better ways for New Yorkers to express their needs and preferences.

Our current system tends to amplify only the voices of those who have the time and temperament to testify at hearings, decisions on individual projects can seem to lack context or data, and too many stakeholders feel excluded from the process.

Our system rests on the premise that building more has an impact, but we often fail to consider the consequences of doing nothing. As some of you know, my background is in supportive housing, so I am particularly concerned about the 60,000 homeless people who tend not to show up for community board meetings, but whose needs are clearly not well met by our current system.

Other cities have interesting mechanisms in place to encourage the development of more affordable housing, such as the Chapter 40B process in Massachusetts.

It is a delight to be here tonight among the planning nerds of New York City to discuss these issues, and I truly believe that many of the panelists share more values than we might expect.

But here's the bad news:

We don't see any evidence that Comprehensive Planning would help achieve those goals or advance our shared values. CHPC is concerned that Charter Revision is not a nimble enough tool to engage in this type of Comprehensive Planning which has not been undertaken at this scale or intensity. A Comprehensive Plan would take enormous time and resources, the plan would be outdated before the ink was dry, and while we can write a plan into the Charter, NYC is already replete with plans, and the Charter cannot guarantee that a Comprehensive Plan would be useful, meaningful, or taken seriously.

One of the other recommendations submitted to this Commission is radical in its simplicity, and I think provides a wonderful framework for us to assess charter revisions themselves: I don't know who submitted this but I would like to state for the record that I would like to buy this person a beer. The recommendation is as follows: Require that all legislation identify (a) the problem it is intended to solve, (b) the means by which it addresses such problem, (c) the metrics that will be used to determine its success/failure; and (d) appropriate grounds for sunset.

At CHPC, we wish we had thought of this ourselves! We are not convinced that Comprehensive Planning passes such a test, and while we are always in search of new ideas to improve our systems for housing and planning, Charter revision is too blunt a tool to make such a change in such a short period of time.